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Jobs are there, but skilled workers aren't

by Barrie Barber
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Tens of thousands of jobs go wanting in Michigan because workers don't have the skills for nursing, healthcare and advanced manufacturing positions, a state labor and economic leader says.

A job retraining initiative dubbed No Worker Left Behind aims to end that for unemployed or underemployed workers, said Keith W. Cooley, director of the state Department of Labor and Economic Growth.

In an interview with The Saginaw News Editorial Board, Cooley said Friday the agency has asked for \$40 million to retrain up to 100,000 workers and \$10 million more to train 3,000 nursing students and 500 nursing faculty members during the next three years.

"We have got to invest in our workers," he said. "We cannot allow them to be left in the lurch."

The state has earmarked about \$37 million in federal job retraining funds to the No Worker Left Behind initiative, but Cooley said the agency wants to add state dollars to do more.

The agency director was in Saginaw to mark the opening of the department's Unemployment Insurance Agency's Remote Initial Claims Center, a 150-employee site at 999 S. Washington. The call center, which handles unemployment insurance claims, relocated this fall from the Saginaw Centre, 310 Johnson. Saginaw Future Inc. handed the agency a recognition award for keeping the jobs in the city.

Since 2000, Michigan has lost more than 400,000 jobs, mostly in manufacturing, to foreign competition, outsourcing and technological automation on the assembly line.

The state had the highest unemployment rate in the nation at 7.6 percent in December; the Saginaw-Saginaw Township metro area marked a 7.4 percent jobless rate for the same period.

Gov. Jennifer M. Granholm has called on lawmakers to fund the new job growth strategies. Along with jobs, Granholm in her State of the State address last month said education, affordable health care and safe cities are keys to attracting employers.

Saginaw Future President and Chief Executive Officer JoAnn T. Crary said the Saginaw Valley has unfilled high-skilled jobs in health care and computer-aided manufacturing, and in skilled trades such as chemical operators and welders.

"As far as this region goes, we can always use more training dollars," she said.

The No Worker Left Behind initiative would pay up to \$5,000 a year for two years to cover college tuition or technical training in high-growth regional jobs or entrepreneurial skills. Workers must take a Michigan Works skills assessment test, earn a family income of less than \$40,000 a year, have graduated from high school at least two years ago, are not full-time college students or remain unemployed or have received a termination or layoff notice.

Like the governor, Cooley said the alternative energy industry expansion is critical. Hemlock Semiconductor Corp.'s search for its next expansion site beyond a \$1 billion plan in the works in Thomas Township is "on our radar screen," he said.

"We don't want to lose that," said Cooley, a former chief executive officer of Focus Hope in Detroit and a one-time General Motors Corp. engineer.

HSC manufactures one-third of the world's supply of polycrystalline silicon, a super pure rock-like material used in electronics and solar cells. It expects to double production in Thomas Township by 2010.

To give employers a bigger incentive, the state could loosen its grip in some areas outside of job safety regulations and retraining, said Veronica Horn, executive vice president at the Saginaw County Chamber of Commerce.

"What we need in this state is a lighter regulatory burden on companies ... all the way around," she said.

Cooley said the Great Lakes State's effort to attract and retain employers would gain more traction if it had "one-stop shopping" to handle the multitude of issues employers confront with state permits.

The state has made progress: The agency has dropped the time it takes to process permits to an average of 183 days from 430, he said.

"That's a big change, but we don't think it's enough," he said. "I'd like to see it go down to 30 days."